

What is an Adventure Playground?

An adventure playground is a place where children of all ages, under friendly supervision, are free to do many things they can no longer easily do in our crowded urban society: things like building — huts, walls, forts, dens, tree-houses; lighting fires and cooking; tree-climbing, digging, camping; perhaps gardening and keeping animals; as well as playing team and group games, painting, dressing up, modelling, reading — or doing nothing. For it must also be a place where children just meet and talk in a free, relaxed atmosphere. They do not have to pay to enter, nor do they join as members. They just come to the playground whenever they feel like it.

Why an Adventure Playground?

On a conventional playground, once a child has swung on the swing, slid down the slide, rocked on the metal horse, what next? An adventure playground is more fun for children because they are playing on or with things they have built or made themselves. The structures and activities are always changing, there is always something new going on. And by everyone "doing his own thing", the children unconsciously develop their faculties to an astonishing degree.



The Playleader

But won't it be dangerous to have children doing all these different and exciting things? That is where the playleader comes in: no adventure playground will work satisfactorily without playleaders. The main function of the playleader, whether man or woman, is not to organise or push, but to listen, guide and help, in short to "enable", and to see the children do not hurt themselves or each other. Apart from precautions necessary against injury, there are no formal rules on the playground. But with a good playleader most of the children using it, especially the regulars, will become attached to the playground as "theirs", and so will accept an unwritten code of social behaviour. The relationship between the playleader and each individual child is of great importance: he must know when to help a child and when to withdraw so that the child can work out the problem alone and learn confidence through unaided achievement. The playleader will try unobtrusively to get children involved in as many ways as possible.

Landscaping

Landscaping is extremely important and needs very careful planning beforehand — it can make all the difference to the playground's future success. It will depend, of course, on the site available, but in any case the site should always be fenced off, for protection of tools, equipment, and the children's own huts and dens, to prevent dumping of rubbish, and to give children a sense of security. It should be a little way away from private houses if possible, and in many areas it is a good idea to have it screened by a hedge or a creeper along the fence. Children enjoy being able to make a noise, and should be given the chance to do so with the minimum of annoyance and disturbance to others. In any new housing scheme an adventure playground should be planned as an integral part of the community development.

Management Committee

An effective management committee, with many of its members drawn from the immediate neighbourhood, is essential. Representatives of the local authority and other interested bodies should also be invited to serve on it. Local authorities, although assuming financial responsibility (see below), are strongly advised to run the playgrounds in their area by delegation to these management committees. The playleader is responsible to the committee, which will assist him in obtaining materials and in contacts with all the educational and social services. It will also give him help and advice with any problems that may crop up. A playleader needs a wide supportive circle which must be maintained by the committee.

Finance

Local authorities will, it is hoped, provide suitable sites and assume financial responsibility for the buildings and the major part of the annual outgoings such as salaries, main services and general upkeep. Provided certain essential conditions are fulfilled, the National Playing Fields Association can make a grant-in-aid to the first year's salary of a playleader and to initial capital costs and equipment. There will always be a need for expenditure on important "extras", which will not be met from official sources, so the local community should be involved from the start in fund-raising activities. This will lead to a closer relationship with the playground and a feeling of responsibility for it.



Equipment

Equipment is always kept to a minimum on an adventure playground. The main necessities are an unending supply of wood, plus tools and nails, for building huts, dens, etc. At least one lorry-load a week may be needed in peak periods, and local firms are often very co-operative over this. Other requirements are such things as paint, paper, crayons, glue, chalk, wool; books; old clothes and materials for dressing up; and plenty of bats and balls. It is very useful to have a van or similar vehicle, both for collecting materials and when the playleader is arranging outings away from the playground.

The Hut

The other essential is some kind of indoor accommodation, so that the playground can stay open in wet or cold weather, and all the year round. Besides giving space for playleader's office and a store, the "hut" can be used in the mornings and afternoons in term-time for mothers and toddlers or pre-school playgroups. Later in the day school-children will come in, and the playground will generally remain open until 10 pm as soon as staffing permits. If it closes at other times, children will often have no alternative space to the streets, with the continual danger of accidents this entails. It is vital they should have somewhere to go all day and every day, especially during school holidays.

Insurance

The management committee must, of course, make sure before opening that they have full liability insurance for the playground, including building and equipment, and also insurance cover for staff. This is neither difficult nor expensive to obtain, and they are recommended to consult the NPFA pamphlet on the subject.

The Playground and the Community

The management committee and the playleader should be able to recruit voluntary helpers, and should co-operate as much as possible with the following:

- 1) Local schools and teachers, so that both staff and children know about the playground and its purpose and become involved with it, e.g. through sixth-formers acting as helpers.
- 2) Local clubs, groups and organisations. The adventure playground is *not competing with* existing clubs and groups, indeed it should be a recruiting ground for them. Directly the playleader feels that someone shows a particular interest or aptitude, he should introduce that boy or girl to the appropriate club or group. The benefit can be mutual, for the club or group will often provide a helper to give advice or coaching at the beginner level to children using the playground.
- 3) Youth Service and Physical Education organisers, for the same reasons.
- 4) Police, probation officers and indeed all social workers, who can open up channels of specialised help and advice. They can also on occasions help the playleader if a situation arises too difficult for him or his assistants to handle.

In this way the community can flow into the adventure playground, and in turn the parents and children will devise and arrange activities which, although thought up on the playground, may take place outside it, e.g. voluntary service for the elderly or disabled. The playground is thus a focal point for the growth of a new community spirit, in both new towns and new housing estates as well as in old settled areas.



The Cost – and The Benefits

But aren't adventure playgrounds very expensive? Yes, if you consider play as a means of "passing time". No, if you understand that the out-of-school activities of children and young people are a vitally important part of their education for life. And more and more local authorities, realising the value of adventure playgrounds for children's physical, mental and emotional development, are offering financial aid – in many cases 100%.

There are other items, too, which should appear in the cost-benefit analysis. Most children are naturally adventurous and like testing themselves against danger. It is safer for them to do adventurous things in a playground where there is a playleader's guiding hand and watchful eye than on the streets, on the railways, or in derelict housing; and accidents can be extremely expensive. Bored, restless and unhappy children are those most likely to get into trouble – they will be costing society money. Adventure playgrounds can in the long run save the rate-payers a lot of money by giving children plenty of play space and the chance for regular enjoyment of creative play. On all counts, in fact, every new adventure playground established is a positive asset to society.

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